

Eric Vatikiotis-Bateson (1952–2017)

The wild ride is over. Eric Vatikiotis-Bateson, who was a Professor (and former Canada Research Chair) in the Department of Linguistics and the Director of the Cognitive Systems Program at the University of British Columbia (UBC), died on May 31, 2017, in Vancouver. He led a very unusual life and had a remarkable and unique career. To appreciate him and to understand his approach to language, thought, science, and the world, it helps to consider the influences of family and geography. His biological parents were Panayiotis Jerasimof Vatikiotis (1928–1997), a Greek political scientist and historian of the Middle East, and Lois Cammack (1929), an American therapist and social worker. After Vatikiotis and Cammack divorced, Lois married Gregory Bateson (1904–1980), an English social scientist and cyberneticist, in 1961. Together Lois and Gregory raised Eric, living mostly in Hawaii and California. As Gregory had previous marriages and Vatikiotis remarried after his divorce from Lois, there were many half- and stepbrothers and -sisters, few of whom had the same parents. Familial complexity was a fact of Eric's life, as were intellectual ferment and excitement. As a backdrop, there was a wanderlust that continued throughout his life and shaped his work and partnerships.

Eric was a Johnnie, graduating with a BA/BSc in Philosophy and Physics from St. John's College, Annapolis, MD, in 1974. The community at St. John's (which is known for its great books program and strong community of learning) was small, brilliant, intense, and closely knit. He received his MA (in 1978) and his PhD (in 1987) in Linguistics from Indiana University, in Bloomington. After receiving his MA from Indiana, Eric and his wife Laurie Fais spent several years in Kuwait where he was a Lecturer at Kuwait University. They were very fond of the Middle East – one of the last Bateson family vacations was in 2015 to Kuwait, Dubai, and Oman. Returning to the USA in 1981, the Bateson family moved to the east coast. Eric split his time among 3 locations: the family lived on campus at the Forman School in Litchfield, CT, where Laurie worked. Eric started working at Haskins Laboratories in New Haven while he finished his dissertation, and spent time at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, which hosted a diverse community of stone masons, new age musicians, and intellectual and religious scholars.



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In July 1990, Eric and family, which now included 3 young daughters, moved to Japan, where he was a Senior Researcher and Department Head at the ATR Research Laboratories in Kyoto. The family remained there for over a dozen years. This was a fertile time for Eric. ATR at that time was reminiscent of Bell Laboratories in its heyday, fostering unique collaborations and providing critical resources to some of the best scientists in the world. Eric leveraged this situation into a nonstop, high-energy intellectual feast, inviting participation from frequent visitors, providing unique opportunities for young researchers, and engaging in numerous collaborations with colleagues from around the world, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, the USA, and others. Eric's perspective was global – he had a particular skill for identifying, fostering, and mentoring young scientists and engineers. This global, collaborative effort was also enhanced by his participation in and organization of a series of important international workshops and meetings. Some key examples include: the NATO Advanced Studies Institute Workshop: Speechreading by Man and Machine at the Château de Bonas, Castéra-Verduzan, France, in 1995; meetings of the International Seminar on Speech Production in various countries; many meetings of the Acoustical Societies of America and Japan; the first Audio-Visual Speech Processing (AVSP) meeting, Rhodes, in 1997; AVSP '98, Terrigal, Australia; AVSP 2005, which Eric organized on Vancouver Island; the ATR Workshop on Temporal Issues for Speech, Turtle Bay, Hawaii, in 1996. This latter meeting was pure Eric. He invited speakers from a broad range of disciplines such as computational modeling, neurophysiology and physiology of action and perception, avian ecology, the study of neural clocks, and the nonlinear dynamics of heart rhythms to present to researchers who studied speech motor control. The locale and the food were amazing, and the conference schedule had abundant free time for social interaction. Talking over coffee (and for Eric, cigarettes) was a priority.

In April 2003, Eric moved to Vancouver, BC, Canada, where he joined the UBC as a Professor in the Department of Linguistics (Canada Research Chair). Laurie took a position in the Department of Psychology. While at the UBC, along with his teaching and research responsibilities, Eric served in many roles: he was the Director of the Cognitive Systems Program at the University, participated in many community service activities and professional societies, including the Acoustical Society of America, the Audio-Visual Speech Association, the International Society for Ecological Psychology, the International Speech Communication Association, and the Linguistic Society of America, and served as a participant in and organizer of many conferences. Eric was also a research affiliate at Haskins Laboratories and periodically was a visiting professor at universities in Australia, Germany and Brazil.

Eric's interests were extremely broad and included the structure, organization, and function of communicative expression, particularly in language and music. He argued that explanations for these behaviors might be complex. On his webpage at the UBC, he wrote in a very Eric way: "In particular, I am interested in computing the ubiquitous, but time-varying, coordination that exists within and between interacting individuals and is necessary in establishing and maintaining perceptibly stable and meaningful patterns of behaviour." Throughout his career he developed innovative experimental techniques and computational approaches that could match the complexity that he knew lay behind our most natural and commonplace activities.

In addition to authoring or coauthoring numerous papers and conference proceedings, Eric was the coeditor of books on speech production and speech perception, was

coauthor of *Linguistics for Dummies*, and at the time of his death was working on a book, with Philip Rubin, entitled *Talking Heads: Communication, Embodiment, and Interaction* (currently unpublished).

Amidst all the varied academic activities, Eric maintained strong ties to his extended family through visits to Greece, including treks to the Vatikiotis ancestral homestead at the base of the cliffs in Lindos on Rhodes, events related to the Bateson constellation, including the Lindisfarne Association, time at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, and meetings with celebrities such as the Dalai Lama. Having spent time in the US Merchant Marine and having spent much of his life near the ocean, Eric remained fond of the nautical life. Many hours were spent with family and friends in the often treacherous, but mostly beautiful, Vancouver waterways. Laurie has noted his fascination “throughout his life [with] any body of water he could get near – from the pond on the farm in Indiana where we went to grad school, to the Gulf in Kuwait where he helped a friend study mudskippers, to the Forman pool, to resurrecting his surfing skills on vacation in Japan, to those beautiful waters of the Georgia Strait.”

On September 16, 2017, there was a gathering at Roy Barnett Recital Hall at the UBC to remember him and celebrate his unforgettable vitality, brilliance, and personality. The BC and UBC flags were lowered on Friday, June 2, 2017, in his memory.

Although Eric’s life was incredibly rich, the most important part was his family. At the center of it all was his wife and partner, Laurie, who was at the heart of these worldly adventures. On October 14, 2017, friends and family gathered at his daughter Caitlin’s home Stoneyhaw, in Burlington, NC. This farmland has been in Eric’s family for 3 generations. Eric played, and worked, there as a child and helped Caitlin build her home there. All 3 of Eric and Laurie’s daughters, Caitlin, Malia, and Indiana, were there with their families (including their several grandkids), along with other family and friends from around the world. The evening ended with a pig roast, and with confetti, ashes, and lanterns shot into the sky.

Eric touched many lives, nurtured many careers, annoyed some, invigorated others, and, ultimately, was a font of innovation and intellectual inspiration. Sometimes he was cranky and he smoked too much – but he pushed us hard and made us think. It was always a wild ride, laden with uncertainty, excitement, sudden bumps and bashes, and a hell of a lot of fun.

*Philip Rubin
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